

people actually believe, then they will decline to ratify a balanced budget amendment. So why not give it a chance?

Perhaps some of my colleagues believe that the Congressional Budget Office is wrong in its disturbing projections and dire warnings or that the Government Accountability Office is mistaken and the fiscal path we are on is sustainable after all or that the Concord Coalition and the Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget are wrong about how national debt interest payments will continue to grow and add to the debt or that economists are wrong to warn about the impact of a sustained national debt of this magnitude. If my colleagues are convinced that everyone else is wrong and that our fiscal future is just fine and hunky-dory after all, then I still urge them to let the American decide. The Constitution belongs to the American people—not to the people here, although we are part of the American people.

President Obama once said that a \$4 trillion increase in the national debt is irresponsible and unpatriotic. This week he submitted a budget for fiscal year 2017 that reflects the same recycled misguided policies that have both added to the debt and have failed in Congress. On all of the budgets he submitted, there was only one vote for his budget. There was a bipartisan rejection in each case.

President Obama wants to expand a broken Medicaid system rather than reform it. He wants to impose higher taxes to prop up more government spending. He continues to turn a blind eye to the Nation's unsustainable entitlement programs that are propelling the national debt to unprecedented levels.

We all know the facts and the dangers about the national debt crisis. We all know that the American people are, if anything, more alarmed about this crisis than we are—certainly with the exception of myself. The only reason that Members of Congress have refused to give our fellow citizens a choice about adding a balanced budget amendment to the Constitution is that they know what that choice will be. I say with respect, but as strongly as I can, that this is not a legitimate basis for refusing to propose a balanced budget amendment. In our system of government, as Founder James Wilson once put it, the people are the masters of government. Only they have authority to set the rules for government. This choice must be theirs, not ours.

Here is the heart of the matter. First, the national debt crisis poses a significant and growing threat to the economic and national security of this country. In fact, we have never been in such an extended, perilous period than we are right now. Second, Congress has tried and failed to address this crisis by either willpower or legislation and will do so only if the Constitution requires it. Third, the decision of whether to use the Constitution to require fiscal

responsibility belongs to the American people, not to Congress. A balanced budget amendment would allow the American people to make that choice.

What are we afraid of? Are we afraid that we can't keep going on spending like this or that the American people might pass a balanced budget amendment to the Constitution? Yes, I think we are afraid of that, but we shouldn't be. We should be glad to have it in the Constitution itself. We could either take the responsibility we were elected for and propose a balanced budget amendment or the American people may do it for us.

The key to me is to pass a balanced budget constitutional amendment. I filed it, and it has a great number. It was filed right after we got into the Congress. It is an amendment that literally every one of us should support.

Let's get real about this national debt. Let's get real about helping our American people survive. Let's get real about having the greatest Nation on Earth continue to fight for liberty and freedom and independence and religious rights all over the world and all over this country. Let's get real about the future of our young people. Let's get real about being in the U.S. Senate and having an opportunity to form a real, solid approach to this, which would make all the difference in the world.

Mr. President, I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The bill clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Ms. KLOBUCHAR. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

AMBASSADOR NOMINATIONS

Ms. KLOBUCHAR. Mr. President, I am here today to speak about U.S. policy toward Iran.

I wish to mention first that we are continuing to work on the issue of State Department nominees. Of course, my focus has been on the Swedish and Norwegian Ambassadors from our country to those two countries. We have now gone for 867 days without a confirmed ambassador to Norway and 476 days since the President nominated an ambassador for Sweden.

I think we have made it very clear that nearly every Member in this Chamber does not have an issue with having a vote or even an issue with the qualifications of these nominees who went through the Foreign Relations Committee without objection. Senator COTTON himself said: I believe both nominees are qualified. We have significant interest in Scandinavia. My hope is that both nominees receive a vote in the Senate sooner rather than later.

As we know, Senator CRUZ has had various issues not related to the nomi-

nees or our two strong allies, Norway and Sweden. We are hoping we can find a way forward so that he lifts his hold and we can continue to move forward with the 11th and 12th biggest investors in the United States of America, those countries, Norway and Sweden, being able to have Ambassadors like the rest of Europe. Every other major Nation has an ambassador.

I wish to thank Senator MCCONNELL and Senator REID and Senator CORKER and Senator CARDIN for their work on this issue. I am hoping to get this done as soon as possible.

U.S. POLICY TOWARD IRAN

Ms. KLOBUCHAR. Mr. President, as I mentioned, I rise today to discuss U.S. policy toward Iran—an issue that is critical to our national security and the security of our allies. When we talk about our policy toward Iran, we must do so with our eyes wide open. The Iranian regime is one of the world's leading State sponsors of terrorism. It threatens Israel, it destabilizes the region, and it abuses human rights. That is why I have cosponsored the Iran Policy Oversight Act, a bill that allows Congress to move quickly to impose economic sanctions against Iran's terrorist activity. It expands military aid to Israel, and it ensures that agencies charged with monitoring Iran have the resources they need.

Preventing Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon is one of the most important objectives of our national security policy. I have strongly advocated for and supported the economic sanctions that have brought Iran to the negotiating table over the last few years. Those sanctions resulted in a nuclear nonproliferation agreement between Iran and the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Russia, and China.

The Iran nuclear agreement, as we have talked about many times on this floor—including my own words—is an imperfect but necessary tool to prevent Iran from getting a nuclear weapon. In order for the agreement to work, of course, we must remember that simply trusting Iran to do the right thing is not an option. We must be vigilant in our monitoring and in our verification.

In my view, our national security strategy must focus on three things. This is overall: Protecting our citizens, eliminating threats to our national security, and never losing sight of our core American values. It is through this lens that we must approach Iran.

First of all, we must do all we can to keep our own citizens safe. We can't be naive. We cannot trust in the Iranian regime—and the Iranian regime continues to prove that is the case. Iran repeatedly violated the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1929 by testing ballistic missiles, most recently on October 10 and November 21 of 2015. The very next month, in December of 2015, Iran conducted a live fire exercise using unguided rockets

near a U.S. aircraft carrier in international waters. Make no mistake, this was an intentional provocation.

Just last month Iran announced it flew a surveillance drone over a U.S. aircraft carrier. Afterwards, an Iranian Navy commander went on State TV and said the drone strike was a “sign of bravery” that “allowed our men to go so close to the warship and shoot such beautiful and accurate footage of the combat units of the foreign forces.”

Iran flying military drones over our aircraft carriers means that we must respond.

We also have to keep in mind that Iran isn’t just provoking our military. Iran also targets innocent civilians by funding terrorism around the world. Iran is the world’s leading State sponsor of terrorism. Iran funds Hezbollah, a terrorist group that wreaks havoc in the Middle East. Recently Hezbollah was accused of recruiting five Palestinian men to attack Israelis using explosives. Luckily, the Israeli defense forces were able to stop the attack before anyone was hurt.

Iran also continues to defend Bashar al-Assad and attack U.S.-backed rebel forces in Syria. The United Nations estimates that Iran spends \$6 billion a year to fund Assad’s government. What is Assad doing with that money? He buys barrel bombs to level entire Syrian towns. He pays for blockades to prevent food, medicine, and other critical supplies from reaching his own people. He is starving entire villages in northern Syria where children are starving and thousands of people have been forced to survive on grass because Assad and troops from Hezbollah will not let food and medicine get to them.

Iran is funding a government that is responsible for a civil war that has killed 250,000 people and displaced 11 million more. Again, we need to be at the top of our game when it comes to sanctions. The worst would be for a country that behaves in this manner and that disrespects international human rights to have access to a nuclear weapon, which is why many of us in this Chamber did support the agreement. While imperfect, we did support the Iranian nuclear agreement.

Our national security strategy also must focus on eliminating threats. We must demonstrate that the United States has the capability to stand up to Iran when it funds terror and seeks to destabilize the world.

Given Iran’s history, we can anticipate that it will test the boundaries of international agreements, and we have to be ready to respond when it does so. That is why we must hold Iran accountable every step of the way. Imposing harsh sanctions against those responsible for Iran’s ballistic missile program is a good start.

Iran’s ballistic missile program is a threat to regional and global security. Any person or business involved in helping Iran obtain illicit weapons should be banned from doing business with the United States, have their as-

sets and financial operations immediately frozen, and have their travel restricted. Minimizing the threat Iran poses also means working to ensure that the money flowing into Iran now that nuclear sanctions are lifted is not used to further destabilize the region and spread terrorism. We must monitor the flow of terrorist financing and use every tool available to punish bad actors who seek to do harm.

It is also known that Iran has a terrible human rights record. In fact, Iranian Americans and Iranians around the world will be the first people to tell you that 35 years of religious dictatorship has been a human rights nightmare for the people of Iran.

Recently, thousands of Iranians took to the streets of Paris to join a mass demonstration protesting President Ruhani’s visit to Paris. Those protestors are demonstrating against things like Iran’s policy to permit girls as young as 9 to boys as young as 15 to be sentenced to death. They protested Iran’s continuing suppression of journalists and freedom of speech.

Beyond imprisoning journalists—and we do applaud the recent release of the Washington Post journalist. I was so honored to be at the opening recently at the Washington Post facility where he appeared and spoke. We learned how he was taken from his home in Iran at gunpoint, blindfolded, handcuffed, and thrown into solitary confinement for 18 months until recently his release was negotiated. Beyond imprisoning journalists, Iran arbitrarily jails human rights activists, and it oppresses religious minorities including Christians, Jews, and Sunni Muslims.

America has a long history of being an arbiter of peace and security around the world. In order to continue this legacy, we must hold Iran accountable for its human rights violations.

I sponsored the Iran Policy Oversight Act because it is a bill that does three important things to hold Iran accountable. First, it allows Congress to more quickly impose economic sanctions against Iran’s terrorist activities. This is really important because the best way to stop terrorism is to cut off the financing for it. We should be doing everything in our power to better track terrorist financing so that we can stop the flow of money that funds suicide bombers and illicit weapons.

The United States and the international community have maintained sanctions against Iran for decades. I have voted to increase sanctions on Iran’s oil imports and strengthen sanctions against human rights violators in Iran. Sanctions are a powerful tool, and Congress should exercise its authority to implement them as fast as possible against people who fund international terrorism.

Second, the bill also expands military aid to Israel. The United States plays a critical role in supporting Israel’s defense. The United States and Israel have enjoyed a friendship based on values rooted in democracy, free-

dom, and mutual strategic goals. Protecting Israel—our most reliable ally in the Middle East, the beacon of democracy—against a hostile Iran is essential.

Third, the bill ensures that agencies charged with monitoring Iran have the resources they need. We cannot take Iran’s word for it that they are obeying the rules. We need strong independent verification and monitoring. The United States and our European partners must fulfill our obligation to fund the international agencies responsible for that monitoring.

In order to protect our citizens, Congress must exercise its constitutional authority to enact legislation that expands oversight of the Iran nuclear agreement. We must also continue to work with the P5+1 to ensure that the agreement is strictly enforced. Iran must understand that we will not hesitate to snap back sanctions if it fails to comply with the rules. Sanctions were effective at getting Iran to the table, and they will continue to be a tool that allows the United States and our allies to minimize the threat posed by Iran.

Those of us who supported the Iran nuclear agreement have a special responsibility to ensure that it works. In fact, this whole Senate has a responsibility, regardless of whether Members supported it or not. It is in the best interest of our country. We cannot shirk from our duties and we must be vigilant. We owe it to the American people, to Israel, and to our allies. Our mission here is clear: We must protect our own citizens by exercising our authority to enact strong legislation to ensure that Iran does not cheat on its international commitments. Because we know from experience that Iran will test the international community, we must be ready to respond when it does.

Iran must know that if it violates the rules, the response will be certain, swift, and severe. We must also minimize the threat Iran poses to our citizens and the world by doing everything in our power to stop Iran from funding the world’s terrorists.

Last year the world was shaken by a series of successful terrorist attacks on innocent civilians. The attacks in Paris, Lebanon, Mali, and San Bernardino, right here in the United States, remind us that the victims of these massacres will never be limited to one nationality or one ethnicity or one religion.

It is critical that we take additional steps to stop countries like Iran from funding terrorism and destabilizing the world. Stopping Iran’s support of terrorism protects us here at home, but it also helps millions of refugees fleeing Syria, the children that are starving in cities like Madaya, and the families fleeing mortar fire in Yemen. Our values of justice, democracy, and freedom for all demand nothing less.

Iran’s recent behavior suggests that the United States needs to have the ability to snap back as soon as possible. We have to have the ability to

impose sanctions. That is why I am supporting this bill. I urge my colleagues to do the same.

Mr. President, I yield the floor.

Thank you.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Indiana.

VETERANS CHOICE PROGRAM

Mr. DONNELLY. Mr. President, I rise today to talk about the Veterans Choice Program and the challenges some of Indiana's veterans are experiencing with its implementation.

Our veterans have served our country and have sacrificed for our country every day. Some come home bearing physical or mental wounds. Some bear both. Serving also means being away from their families, who also sacrifice for us. Veterans have missed their sons' or daughters' first words, first steps, birthdays, little league games, holidays, and many other life milestones that we all treasure.

When our veterans first come home, they are met with the many challenges of settling back into everyday life, which can include stress from finances to reconnecting with their wife or husband and sons and daughters. Some, as mentioned, must deal with the physical and mental wounds of war.

All of our vets should be able to have peace of mind that they will be able to have a good-paying job and access to quality health care. Our veterans should not be burdened with wondering if or when they will be able to schedule a medical appointment.

While we can never fully repay our veterans or their families for their service and sacrifice, our country has a sacred responsibility to honor our veterans and to take care of them. Serving our veterans and making sure they receive the best care possible, whether for physical ailments or for mental health challenges, is something I take very seriously. We are committed to ensuring each and every one of them has access to quality care and the full range of benefits they have earned by their service.

Following gross mismanagement and misconduct at several VA medical centers nationally, in 2014 Congress passed the bipartisan Veterans Access, Choice, and Accountability Act that was signed into law. The law established the Veterans Choice Program to help address the inadequate access to care that our vets were facing. The program is designed to enable veterans who can't see a VA doctor within 30 days or who live more than 40 miles from a VA facility to access a local non-VA provider using a Veterans Choice Card.

Unfortunately, there are repeated examples of the Veterans Choice Program coming up short. It is our responsibility as legislators to review, follow up, and ask questions about this program we helped to put in place to make sure it is working correctly and efficiently.

I stand here today to state that some Indiana veterans are experiencing

problems with the Veterans Choice Program, and we must work to address these issues and to solve them.

There are two third-party vendors contracted to help the VA implement the Veterans Choice Program around the country and in Indiana—Health Net Federal Services, which covers most of our State, and TriWest, which extends into parts of southern Indiana. Instead of making Veterans Choice Program appointments directly with local hospitals, veterans must use Health Net Federal Services or TriWest. In recent weeks, our office has heard from Indiana veterans who are experiencing long wait times of up to 90 minutes on the phone and disconnected calls when they contact Health Net Federal Services.

I share the stories of some of these veterans and the struggles they have dealt with. Vietnam vet Daniel Vice from Marion, IN, had eye surgery through the Veterans Choice Program and had been told by Health Net that his postoperation appointments would also be covered. When he was at the eye doctor for his follow-up appointment, he learned that Health Net Federal Services had not sent over his paperwork. This meant that instead of being covered by the Veterans Choice Program, Dan would have to pay out of his own pocket. Dan contacted our office while at the doctor seeking help. Our case manager called Health Net only to be put on hold for 21 minutes before speaking to a supervisor. The company could not provide immediate answers but called back our staff a few hours later and said that Dan's paperwork had not been approved. We continue to work with Dan to get answers to solve this problem.

Veteran Robert Trowbridge, from South Bend, had surgery on his ankle almost 6 months ago and has yet to be scheduled for his post-op physical therapy. He called Health Net many times and was put on hold for 30 to 40 minutes each time he called. When he was able to reach a rep, he was told repeatedly that his paperwork was sent to be approved, only to find out 4 months later that there was a problem. He was later informed that his Social Security number was not attached to his file. Frustrated, Robert contacted our office for assistance.

Our staff experienced firsthand the frustrations and inadequate customer service that some of our vets like Robert face. One of our case managers called Health Net and it took 23 minutes into the conversation with a representative before the customer service rep even asked for the veteran's name. After calls with a representative, then a supervisor, and then a manager from Health Net Federal Services, we were finally able to work with the manager to resolve the issue for Robert.

What our veterans are going through to schedule appointments and access their benefits through the Veterans Choice Program is completely unacceptable. Our office continues to work

to assist vets who experience difficulties.

I have called on Health Net Federal Services to get answers. We need to get to the bottom of this problem, and we need to ensure that all Hoosier veterans and all American veterans and their families receive the timely and quality care they deserve.

I will work nonstop to end this problem, and our office will continue to work nonstop to make sure we get to the bottom of the problems that our Hoosier veterans are having with the Veterans Choice Program. They gave too much to this country to be treated this way. We will solve these problems for Hoosier veterans and for every American veteran.

I yield back the remainder of my time.

Mr. President, I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The senior assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. CARDIN. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

BLACK HISTORY MONTH

Mr. CARDIN. Mr. President, I rise today to join the American people in celebrating Black History Month, but it should be noted that the immeasurable role African Americans have had in making the Nation the strong Nation that it is today could not be fully recognized in 1 short month. Black history is American history.

This February we highlight the titans of African-American history: Marylanders such as Harriet Ross Tubman, Frederick Douglass, and Thurgood Marshall; icons, including Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Dr. Dorothy Height; and contemporary heroes, such as JOHN LEWIS and Mae Jemison.

We all celebrate the countless men and women whose names will never grace the history books or newspapers, those who fought each day for freedom and equality, those who pushed the limits of innovation, and those who endured and overcame hardships over the centuries.

As we celebrate, the struggle to ensure all Americans under the law are treated equally under the law rages on. I believe that as much as Black History Month is about reflecting on a rich past, it is also a time for all Americans to contemplate how to create a better future.

It is not enough simply to recognize the great contributions that African Americans have made, to honor those who have come before us; we must use Black History Month as a springboard to bring about positive change in America. I have a number of legislative priorities that relate directly to Black History Month and to building a better future.